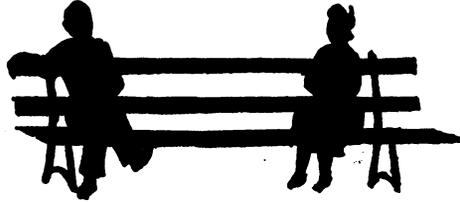


# AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

## Views Old Age



By LEO W. SIMMONS, Ph.D.

OLD AGE may be viewed either as a problem or a challenge, and both socially and personally. I submit two quotations, one stressing the problem side and the other signifying the challenge.

Cato the Elder is reported to have said: "For my part, I prefer to be an old man for a somewhat shorter time, than to be an old man before my time." He saw the problem side.

One Joseph Choate concludes that people are really happiest in their seventies and eighties, so his advice is, "Hurry up and get there." He sees the challenge.

However we look at it, we are confronted with the plain fact of a spectacular increase of old people all around us. We can see these old people in the present or we can study them in the past.

My own interests have led me more toward the cross-cultural and worldwide views on aging than to the specifics of our present times.

It has been very helpful to look for the uniformities and the common elements that underlie the experience of old age in different times and places. One way to state this issue is to

---

*Dr. Simmons, professor of sociology at Yale University, is noted for his studies in social anthropology and medical sociology. Among his publications is "The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society."*

ask: What is new and different, really, and what is old and common to all mankind in this matter of aging? Answers to this question give us background, points of orientation, and they may also highlight the current issues of our own age.

Among many peoples in primitive and historical settings, I have looked for two things:

- The persistent or recurring interests of aging persons. What are their needs or what do they want, almost everywhere?
- The solutions that different societies have made to the problems of aging. What have different peoples done about the needs of aging? What solutions are most fundamental and widespread?

It turns out, as I see it, that the basic interests of aging persons appear to be more uniform than the solutions or the appraisals of these solutions.

### What We Want

A careful survey over a long period of time of 71 different peoples, distributed worldwide, has disclosed recurring interests of aging persons that can be summed up pretty well in a five-fold way:

- To live as long as possible, or at least until life's satisfactions no longer compensate for its

privations, or until the advantages of death seem to outweigh the burdens of life. Life is, indeed, precious to the old.

- To get more rest, or, perhaps, to get release from the necessity of wearisome exertion at humdrum tasks and to get protection from too great exposure to physical hazards—opportunities, in other words, to safeguard and preserve waning physical energies. Old people have to learn to hoard their energies.

- To remain active participants in group affairs in either operational or supervisory roles, any participation being preferable to idleness and indifference. “Something to do, and nothing to be done,” is perhaps the main idea.

- To safeguard or even strengthen any prerogatives acquired such as skills, possessions, rights, authority, and prestige. The aged want to hold on to whatever they have. Seniority rights are zealously guarded.

- Finally, to withdraw from life, when necessity requires it, as honorably and comfortably as possible and with maximal prospects for an attractive hereafter.

These five interests—longer life, rest, participation, prerogatives, an easy and honorable release—probably can be subsumed under the two words “influence” and “security” if they are used with broad connotations.

We have observed impressive uniformity in these interests regardless of time and place.

But the ways of adjusting to, and the appraisals of, aging show very wide variations. In short, what we oldsters want is simple and clear, but how to get it is complex. It would seem, indeed, that every conceivable adjustment has been tried out by people somewhere in their attempts to enrich and round off the last years of life.

In worldwide perspective, old age may be said to begin relatively early or late in life and to last a long or short time. Its coming may be resented and discounted or welcomed and treasured. Some people actually try to “hurry up and get there,” while others postpone it to ridiculous degrees.

When it does come it may be regarded as an idle and useless period or as an active and fruitful one. It may bring promotions in position and homage with the years or demotions and degradations. It may drag itself out in dull,

tedious boredom or go by quickly and with zest.

The people in one society may look forward to a full and ripe old age; in another, next to none at all; and in still another, to long and empty spans of timepassing. Some may beg to be put away honorably, and others may long to live on even in their misery. Thus, from place to place and from time to time, aging may be viewed as a curse on the one hand or as a challenge on the other.

Here is a generalization, though, that seems to hold universally: Every human being has had either to die or grow older and, in this dilemma, the social and cultural factors have been extremely important.

Very significant aspects of the social and cultural factors in aging are the inculcated patterns of interpersonal privileges and responsibilities that require or inspire the young and the spry to respect and to provide for the old and the feeble.

All the evidence indicates that these patterns of behavior are not inborn; they are built into the culture. It is almost a maxim that man is the only animal that can be made, willy-nilly, to take care of his grandfather.

Nature in the raw has never been very kind to old age anywhere and in any species. Security for old age is distinctly a human-culture achievement. The taming and the use of fire is a simple example of how man’s material culture can serve and comfort the aged. When fire was finally brought under control, used as a defense against climate and wild animals, applied to the manufacture of implements and the preparation of food, and made a stabilizing factor in family life, with its warm hearth and cozy corner, a new day had dawned for the elders. Indeed, the advantages of fire were soon so closely associated with the frailties of age that when the necessity arose to abandon an old and enfeebled relative it became a popular rite and last favor to leave him with a supply of food, a flame, and some fuel.

There are equally important examples of security for the aged in the development of social relations, such as rules obligating the young to respect, heed, and provide for the old in many and varied forms. Property rights are an outstanding example. But whether and how well any of this has been done depends greatly upon

the existing culture of the time and place and the organization of society itself.

It is noteworthy that in some societies such solicitude for the aged has seemed to fall squarely in line with the self-interest of the young. In such cases the solicitous youth could have said of his aid to his elders, truthfully and without pathos, "Grandfather, this helps (not hurts) me more than it does you." In other societies youth does not see such a connection. Why? The answer lies in the culture and the social organization.

Here is an important general principle to consider: Whenever society has provided a mutually supportive relationship between its youth and its elders, old-age security has had its firmest foundation. In contrast, the severest hazard of the aged and the infirm has been to find themselves cut off from the young and the able bodied upon whom they have had to rely. One could speculate that the time may come when youth can manage without the aged; but whatever widens the gap between the two will, more than likely, be at the expense of the latter, especially in the extremities of their dotage. There is no substitute for the ties that bind youth and age in common interests.

### **Five Lessons in Aging**

From here on I will list a few simple lessons that I have learned about aging, five lessons in fact.

First, aging has become a complex and challenging proposition to face personally.

Let me illustrate this lesson with the mention of two common mistakes. The first mistake is to try to compare and to choose between old age and youth. We cannot do that. The choice, really, is between aging and dying. We've had our youth, some of us at any rate. Now, for us, it is age or else. The second mistake is to regard aging primarily as a time of resting, however much we think we like resting. "Old age for rest" is only a half truth at best. The efforts and the strategy of life had better go on, refined and intensified to be sure. Aging successfully is somewhat like riding a bicycle—to stop is to go down.

My second lesson in broad perspective is that aging can be good or bad, and when it is good

it generally is more of an achievement than a gift.

A person, of course, must get to be old before he can make it good, and most human beings have never been able to get there. The farther back we go in human society the earlier people became "old," but fewer and fewer old people are to be found back there.

Here was a great surprise to me in my studies of aging. Societies solved the problems of a successful old age for a few long before they could assure any old age at all for the many. For a long time, in a few spots on earth, one has been able to say truthfully with Joseph Choate, the happiest years of life are in old age, so let's hurry up and get there. There are primitive peoples who frankly regard old age as the best part of life, and they try early to appear, and to be regarded as, older than they are.

Now we suspect that civilization has made the aging period for most of us something less than the best of life. All this ties in with the social determinants of when we become old, on what terms, and how long we are permitted to last. A secret of success for most people facing old age is to find for themselves places in society in which they can age with participation and fulfillment, and to keep on participating tactfully and strategically up to as near the end as possible. Aging must be gamy to the end to be very good.

The third lesson out of our broad background studies is that a stage is reached in aging everywhere in which social assessments of the conditions are uniformly dismal.

Among all peoples a point is reached in aging at which any further usefulness appears to be over and the incumbent is regarded as a living liability. Senility may be a suitable label for this. Other terms among primitive peoples are the "over-aged," the "useless stage," the "sleeping period," the "age-grade of the dying," and the "already dead." Then, without actual death, the prospects are gloomy. There is no question about this generalized social decision; the differences lie in the point at which it is reached. All societies differentiate between old age and this final pathetic plight. Some do something positive about it. Others wait for nature to do it or perhaps assist nature in doing

it. That is a long story that has to be skipped here.

The big point for us is that in primitive societies and, indeed in all societies until modern civilization, this over-age period has not been very significant. Few persons reached this stage; they didn't last long in it. Some were dispatched with varying degrees of dignity and prestige.



The helpless and hopeless period takes on paramount importance, however, in our own civilized times. We are so successful in keeping very old people alive that we don't know what to do with them. Imagine the magnified possibilities of living parts of aging bodies scattered around here and there! Add to this the recognized fact that the useless period is largely socially and culturally determined and that it may be moved up or put off in years. The problem thus becomes unpredictable and staggering.

The social fates are most unfortunate, of course, when so many old people are made to feel useless relatively early in life and to find the twilight years empty, lonely, and long lasting. More and more of life with less and less in it is not a happy prospect. Thus can civilization create more problems for aging than it has yet solved. Death is really the only ultimate solution. Whether life can be good to the last drop or not really depends on when and how we drop.

Our fourth lesson is that there is a pattern of participation for the aged that becomes relatively fixed in stable societies but suffers disruption with rapid social change.

We know that stable societies provide a structured framework for participation, with status and roles that are defined, sex typed, aptitude rated, and age graded. If the pattern stays fixed over many generations, the aging get a lifetime to fit in and entrench themselves.

Here is one way to express the general principle: In the long and steady strides of the social order, the aging get themselves fixed and favored in positions, power, and performance. They have what we call seniority rights. But

when social conditions become unstable and the rate of change reaches a galloping pace, the aged are riding for an early fall and the more youthful associates take their seats in the saddles.

The general pattern for the adjustment of the aged in society fits into five more or less social structures of human groups: (a) the economic order, (b) the family system, (c) the political system, (d) the religiomagical institutions, and (e) the socioeducational systems. It is a long and interesting story to document the changes imposed upon the aged in making adjustments to shifts in these five systems. In general, it can be said that change is the crux of the problem of aging as well as its challenge.

The fifth and last lesson is that the modern challenge is to explore and experiment anew with aging.

We have more aged persons than the world has ever known: 14 million in the United States 65 years old or more and 26 million anticipated by A. D. 2000. And these people are already born! Old age is beginning earlier, with more untapped and unused resources than in earlier times. The old tried and tested patterns of participation and security have been disrupted, and they are passing away.

Perhaps the most important lesson that can come out of the past is that the basic qualities of successful aging rest, after all, upon the capacities and opportunities of individuals to fit well into the social framework of their own times, and in ways that insure prolonged influence and security.



It may well be that there are no genuine substitutes for suitable adaptations and true contributions of ripe age. Certainly the challenge is to rediscover them for the modern world.

We are now accustomed to hearing much about the problems and little about the opportunities of aging, almost as if aging were a curse—and after all our efforts to attain it! It should be kept in mind that the prospect of so many of us reaching old age is in itself a most remarkable achievement, entirely unknown to earlier times. Let us not forget, therefore, that

our society and our community can, and probably will, create before long a brave new climate in which to grow old. That is part of the challenge that has inspired so much thought in recent times on the problems of aging. But it is only part of it. Perhaps even more important, and indeed more crucial, is the challenge of keeping before us a vision of what such an aging population can contribute to our modern way of life.

It is perhaps not amiss to remind ourselves again that in everyman's folkways, the world over, the plain folk have aged most successfully when they have discovered and developed for themselves effective places and functions in the very societies in which they are a part. It is very probable that within our highly complex civilization there lie all around us untapped potentials for aging that may be explored and fitted into our times. Herein lies an old frontier that invites new pioneering, and herein, also, lies the Holy Grail for aging.

#### **Summary**

The world has never before witnessed such a high proportion of people living on what has been called borrowed time. The problem and the challenge are greater for us than they were

for our forefathers or for our primitive forebears. We are emotionally confused and can't decide how long to stay young or when to get old. Most of us are really younger or older than we think.

In broad historical background, there is more agreement on what old people want than there is agreement on how to get it. Five wishes seem to be shared by aging people everywhere: to live as long as possible, to hoard their waning energies, to share in the continuing affairs of life, to safeguard their seniority rights, and to have as easy and honorable release from life as possible. How to get these five wishes fulfilled in later life has differed greatly around the world.

Human societies solved the problem of a successful old age for a few people long before there was any chance for old age for many people. The old solution to a successful old age was to find a useful and respected place in life and to fill it effectively until near the end—an end that came quickly.

Civilization has created more problems for the aged than it has solved. Now we insure more and more life with less and less in it. The challenge is to find new ways to put interest and zest in aging and for the aged.

### **Intensive Therapy Curtails Commitment**

The enormous and growing population of aging persons has become a matter for extensive official concern in that half the residents of mental institutions are past 65. Controlled studies reported by Dr. Lionel Z. Cosin of Oxford, England, indicate that by setting aside relatively few beds for the intensive treatment of older persons with mental aberrations initially thought severe enough to warrant commitment, the Cowley Road Hospital at Oxford was able to take 125 such patients. Only four had to be committed to mental hospitals. Cosin believes that this method of therapy has cut the admissions to mental hospitals by 80 percent for patients over 65. Many of the mental aberrations are caused by simple circulatory deficiency, and most of the patients respond to good medical management in 20, 30, or 40 days.

—*HARALD M. GRANING, M.D., regional medical director with the Public Health Service, Region 5, Chicago, addressing the 1956 Middle States Health Conference.*